Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist Women and their interaction with politics in 'post ceasefire' Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The Belfast Agreement (1998) asserts the right of women to full and equal participation in politics. This has been affirmed by the OFMDFM's Gender Equality Strategy (2006) and supported by international measures such as the CEDAW recommendations and by United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 1325. Most recently this commitment to the advancement of women in public life has been reiterated in the Stormont House Agreement (2014). However in spite of these commitments participation in politics by women in Northern Ireland remains low at both local and national level. This is very much a live issue; the NI assembly recently carried out a consultation on how to increase women's representation, as well as producing research on the issue.

While women are underrepresented across the board in NI, it is markedly lower on the Unionist side of the ethno-national divide. There are barriers to participation experienced by women generally, however women in the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) communities also experience barriers particular to them. Barriers may be exacerbated by other factors such as age and socio-economic background.

This paper aims to examine the gender inequality that traditionally exists in formal politics in Northern Ireland from an ethno-nationalist perspective by focusing on the barriers which women from PUL communities face. This paper will also consider how consociationalism interacts with gender, with specific reference to Northern Ireland.

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Assembly, created by the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998), is a consociational government (McGarry and O'Leary 2009). The current devolved government in Northern Ireland was initially born out of the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998); however there have been subsequent talks which have shaped its operation. The negotiation that led to the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998) included the involvement of a number of high profile, visible women such as Martha Pope (US delegation) (Deiana 2013) Mo Mowlam (then Secretary of State), Liz O'Donnell (part of the Irish delegation) and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) (Ward 2005). The involvement of the NIWC led to the insertion of a clause in the Belfast Agreement asserting the right of women to full and equal participation in formal politics (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See 2006). Subsequent negotiations, for example those resulting in the St Andrews 2006/7 Agreement, have been male dominated (Deiana 2013). While the Stormont House Agreement (NIO 2014) does reference the previous commitments made to women and the 'advancement of women in public life' (p.13), Horgan (2015) suggests it will do more to impede progress, than advance it. The commitments made in the Agreements have been affirmed in the *Gender Equality Strategy (*Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister 2006 p17) and supported by international measures such as the CEDAW recommendations and by United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 1325 (Potter 2014a, Cockburn 2013).

At its inception the Northern Ireland Assembly had 13% female representation (Ward 2000), in spite of the aspirations contained in the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998) in 2014 this had only

increased 20% (Potter 2014b). There are fewer Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) women elected representatives than their Catholic/Nationalist/republican counterparts, from 1998-2011 there were only 17 Unionist MLAs, compared to 42 Nationalist (Matthews 2012 p621). Looking at this in percentage terms, the 2 main Unionist parties had an average of 7.8% women MLAs, and the 2 main Nationalist parties had an average of 24%; In the same period 20 % of MLAs from the non-determining Alliance party were women (Matthews 2012). PUL women are politically active at a community and voluntary sector level (Miller et al 1996), and take part in protests alongside men, such as the Holy Cross School disputes (Ashe 2006), and more recently the flag protests (INTERCOMM and Byrne 2013). There have been recent studies of women's participation in formal politics, some studies have explored the perspective of the political parties and government in Northern Ireland on women's participation in politics (for example Matthews 2012, Deiana 2013, Galligan 2013, Braniff and Whiting 2015). However there is a lack of contemporary research into the perceptions and attitudes of women themselves, and the perspectives of PUL women in particular.

Consociationalism describes a system of power sharing government with equality, proportionality, difference and consensus as the key aspects (O'Leary 2001). It is often used in divided societies (Mehler 2013). Divided societies are those where there is a social cleavage between at least two distant groups of people, for example around religious lines such as in Lebanon (Russell and Shehadi 2005) or linguistic lines such as in Belgium (Deschouwer 2005). It may be clear that a society is divided as there is a violent conflict, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Zahar 2005). However violence is not the only indicator, other signs that a society is divided can be that the groups live, attend school, and spend their leisure time separately (Coakley 2011). Rather than integrating the divided society, consociationalism suggests power sharing government by the political elites (Lijphart 1969)

This paper will discuss the theory of consociationalism and how it has operated in practice, with specific reference to Northern Ireland. It will then consider how consociationalism interacts with gender in general and in Northern Ireland in particular. Finally it will explore the barriers to representation of women in formal politics in Northern Ireland particularly focusing on the experiences of Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist women and their interaction with formal and informal politics, concluding with the proposed research on this issue.

Consociational Theory

Consociationalism has 4 main elements (Lijphart 1969). The first is a 'Grand Coalition', where the political elites work together to govern the country (Lijphart 1969). The Grand Coalition can be structured in a variety of ways such as a power sharing executive as in Northern Ireland (Aughey 2005), multiple people in the top position as in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Zahar 2005) or a committee of people assessing legislation as in Lebanon (Russell and Shehadi). Mutual veto is the second element (Lijphart 1969), this protects each groups interest. The third element is Proportionality (Lijphart 1969). Proportionality is a principle, rather than a prescription, it is not restricted to government, but also public appointment and the allocation of resources (Coakley 2011). The final element is Segmental Autonomy this means where issues are not contentious or only impact on one community they should have the autonomy to self-govern (Lijphart 1969).

Consociationalism in practice

Consociational theory has been put into practice in many countries (Mehler 2013) with different approaches. This section will illustrate how the 4 key elements of consociationalism (Lijphart 1969) are implemented practically.

Grand Coalition

The Grand coalition can be by use of a power sharing government, as in Belgium (Deschouwer 2005).In practice there is a power sharing executive in Macedonia, but it is not specified in the agreement (Bieber 2005). Alternatively it may be by sharing the top positions between communities. In Burundi there are 2 vice presidents, one from the Hutu community and 1 from the Tutsi community (Mehler 2013), Bosnia-Herzegovina has a 3 person presidency, representing the 3 communities (Zahar 2005). In Lebanon there is a predetermined community background for the top 3 positions (Russell and Shehadi 2005).

Mutual Veto

Some states have a veto mechanism within the legislatures, such as the Petition of Concern in Northern Ireland (Aughey 2005). Other countries have mechanisms outside of the legislature, Belgium has a Court of Arbitration to exercise veto power. Generally invoking these mechanisms either results in consensus or gridlock (Deschouwer 2005). Some measures are more informal, a two thirds majority is required for legislation in Burundi, which is in effect a veto (Mehler 2013)

Proportionality

Proportional representation electoral systems are used in some countries to ensure proportionality in elected representatives, other countries such as Comoros use a top up system to ensure there is proportionality (Mehler 2013). Some countries predetermine the representation of each community, In Burundi it is enshrined that the parliament is made up of 40% Tutsi and 60% Hutu (Mehler 2013) and in Lebanon 64 seats are given to each community (Russell and Shehadi 2005). Proportionality should go beyond the elected representatives into public appointments (Coakley 2011), proportionality in Macedonia has gone beyond what was initially set out in the agreement; initially the civil service and public bodies were included in proportional measures, they were subsequently voluntarily enacted by the army (Bieber 2005).

Segmental Autonomy

Segmental autonomy has in some cases lead to a symbolic consociational central government without real power, as in Canada (Whitaker 2010). In Belgium the majority of powers have been devolved to local government, with the central government having 'no meaningful power' (Deschouwer 2005 p 96). This is also the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where there are local government entities for each community, the local government is stronger than the central government.

Consociationalism in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland first attempted consociationalism in 1973 with the Sunningdale agreement (Coakley 2011). It was agreed that proportional representation, with the added stipulation of Nationalists in the executive, would be adopted (Coakley 2011). The subsequent government was short lived, ultimately brought down by gains in the Westminster election by parties

opposed to Sunningdale, and an organised workers strike (Coakley 2011). After its collapse Lijphart said that Northern Ireland was too small to produce enough political talent for consociationalism (cited in Guelke 2012)

During the 1980s there was a program of rolling devolution from Westminster to Northern Ireland (Coakley 2011). But 1998 12 of the councils had voluntarily adopted power sharing (Taylor 2001).there had been a change in attitude towards power sharing and majority rule had been undermined (Coakley 2011). The Downing Street Declaration in 1995 was a revival of the idea of a consociational government in Northern Ireland (Tonge 1998). Along with the change in attitude, the ongoing peace process and the devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales paved the way for the Belfast Agreement (Guelke 2012).

The Belfast Agreement was negotiated by all interested groups, including the extremists and paramilitaries that had been excluded from Sunningdale (Tonge 1998). The terms of the agreement were the least objectionable to both communities, but were not the first preference of either (Tonge 1998). It was supported by referenda both in Ireland and Northern Ireland, however it is possible that only 51% of unionists supported the agreement (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006).

The Belfast Agreement was made up of 3 strands, the first dealt with government within Northern Ireland (Aughey 2005). The key principles were a power sharing executive made up of a dual principleship, ministers who were proportionality appointed and scrutinised by committees that had chairs appointed proportionally (O'Leary 2001). In the chamber some measures required parallel consent, a weighted majority of 60% overall and 40% of each community is required to pass some legislation (Coakley 2011). The Petition of Concern is the veto element in this institution (Aughey 2005). In order to administer the d'Hondt system which allocates positions proportionately, and the other measures, members must designate as Unionist, Nationalist, or Other (Aughey 2005). The assembly was complimented by a civic forum made up of trade unions and voluntary sector groups amongst others, this has since been dissolved (Byrne and McCulloch 2012). Members of the Civic Forum, along with the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and Alliance parties voiced their concern at the institutionalisation of identity (Whitaker 2010).

The second strand dealt with North-South relations, and the third strand dealt with relations between the UK and Ireland (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006), as these are not power sharing in nature they will not be discussed in detail here.

One of the key principles of the agreement was parity of esteem. This afforded equal recognition to the two communities, their culture and aspirations (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006). Whitaker's (2010) view is that this made sectarianism the main dynamic of politics in Northern Ireland. By institutionalising the ethno-national divide the agreement framed politics in those terms, decisions were viewed as being made along those lines. One example is Bairbre de Brún and the closure of the Jubilee maternity hospital, it was viewed by unionists as a sectarian move rather than based on policy (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006). Critics have said that the Belfast Agreement entrenched and encouraged sectarian division (Oberschall and Palmer 2005). Over time the more extreme parties' shares of the votes have grown, polarisation that was not expected has happened (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006). However to counter this, the seemingly more extreme DUP and Sinn Fein are now stakeholders in the system, and may be more moderate than they appear (Aughey 2005).

The Belfast Agreement also contained centripetal elements, including a review of the police force, and the promise of a Bill of Rights (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006), the second of which has not been forthcoming (O'Leary 2001) The Belfast Agreement has resulted in a decline in violence (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006), however the desires of the masses, who say they want to live in mixed housing and have shared education, are not being delivered upon (Oberschall and Palmer 2005).

Consociation and Women

Many consociational agreements include a commitment to equality, and mention of women's participation in Politics (Mehler 2013, Zahar 2005, Hayes and McAllister 2012). There is nothing inherent in consociationalism that excludes women's participation, however often ethno-national identity takes precedence in negotiations and practice (Hayes and McAllister 2012).

Gender equality is often sacrificed to resolve ethno-national conflict (Hayes and McAllister 2012). It has been suggested that ethno-national identity is more salient than gender identity (Byrne and McCulloch 2012), however both are layers of identity of an individual (Kaarsholm 1995). Discussing 'women's issues' is seen as detracting from the main issue of conflict resolution (Rebouché and Fearon 2005), and a focus on gender is seen as diluting ethno-national identity (Byrne and McCulloch 2012).

In general agreements leading to consociational government are negotiated by men (Hayes and McAllister 2012), often these are the same men who have been involved in the conflict (Byrne and McCullough 2012). This gives the opportunity for certain ethno-national groups to reproduce their sexist ideology (Hayes and McAlister 2012).

Gender intersects with ethno-nationalism in a number of ways. Gender intersects with identity around social reproduction as women bear the children of the ethnic group, this can lead to patriarchal fears around women's sexuality, and controlling of it (Wilson and Frederiksen 1995). Gender also Intersects around ideology, stereotypes and practices (Wilson and Frederiksen 1995), women are held more responsible than men in upholding the culture (Rebouché and Fearon 2005). Gender Intersects with consociationalism around the rise and decomposition of nationalism (Wilson and Frederiksen 1995). The rise of nationalism is associated with conservatism especially in relation to women, this is demonstrated in the idea of domesticity demonstrated in Peru (Wilson and Frederiksen 1995). The rise of the individualistic approach is not helpful for minorities, which in many cases includes women (Guelke 2004), and by prioritising ethno-nationalism governments are less equipped to challenge issues such as gender inequality (McGarry and O'Leary 2009). In instances where gender and ethno-national discrimination may both occur, such as candidate selection in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by prioritising ethno-national identity above gender a conflict may be avoided, as it is unlikely that gender discrimination will result in violence whereas ethno-national discrimination might (Rebouché and Fearon 2005).

While representation may be an indicator of gender equality, it does not automatically equal power, or gender sensitive policies (Philips 1999). There are situational, societal and structural barriers to representation, consociationalism can be used to address the structural barriers (Morris 1999). In a comparison between Sri Lanka, which does not have a consociational government, and Malaysia which does, the women in Sri Lanka appeared to have a better standard of living for example higher literacy levels , however in Malaysia women made up more of the government (Morris 1999). In Burundi, which has a stipulation of 30% female

representation, women have not been able to convert their presence into power, and example being the failed attempts to remove patrilineal inheritance laws. (Byrne and McCulloch 2012).

Gender and Consociation in Northern Ireland

In spite of the commitment contained in the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998) in 2012 women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly had only increased to 18.5% (Matthews 2012), 19% in 2014 (Galligan 2014) and is currently at 20% (Potter 2014b). However it has been suggested that gender is not an issue for politicians in Northern Ireland mainly because it is not an issue for voters (McGarry and O'Leary 2009).

Dienna (2013) suggests that by institutionalising ethno-national lines, traditional gender lines were also institutionalised. Writing in 2012 Hayes and McAllister reported that here were still sexist remarks made to female MLAS, and that roles continued to be allocated along gender lines, for example the health social services and public safety committee is disproportionately female, whereas the justice committee has no female members (NI Assembly 2014a).

While women were not represented to a great extent in formal politics following the Belfast Agreement, they were active at grassroots level (Taylor 2001) and also in some of the institutions. There were female representatives in the civic forum, which was possibly conceived as a way to increase the opportunities for female participation (Aughey 2005). Women were also members of the Human Rights commission, however Nelson McCausland of the DUP criticised the scope of this by saying that 'ordinary women', such as those from the Presbyterian Women's Association, or Women's Institute, were not represented (Whitaker 2010) . The proposed Bill of Rights may have improved women's position in society, however it has not come into being (O'Leary 2001). This civil society, which women were active in, is hard to reconcile with consociationalism (Guelke 2004).

Women in Formal Politics in Northern Ireland

There is a long standing commitment to the equal participation of women in politics, from the Belfast Agreement (NIO 1998) to the Stormont house Agreement (NIO 2014) and other strategies and international measures (OFMDFM 2006, Potter 2014a, Cockburn 2013). In spite of this aspiration, there has been little action taken towards actually achieving equal participation (Ward 2005 p. 4) and it has not been realised (Galligan 2014). Subsequent negotiations, for example those resulting in the St Andrews 2006/7 agreement, have been male dominated (Deiana 2013 p403). While the Stormont house Agreement (NIO 2014) does reference the previous commitments made to women and the 'advancement of women in public life' (p.13), Horgan (2015) suggests it will do more to impede progress, than advance it.

The focus the ethno-nationalist divide has resulted in lower visibility for women's participation in formal politics (Galligan 2013 p415). Indeed the Assembly has been described as 'misogynous institution' (Hayes and McAllister 2013 p 126). Deiana (2013 p401) argues that by institutionalising the ethno-nationalist lines in formal politics, traditional gender-lines were also reinforced.

CEDAW has commented that it is concerned with 'the low representation of women in the post conflict process in Northern Ireland, and the failure to fully implement SCR 1325' (McWilliams and Ní Aoláin 2015 p8). In early 2014 a report by the Centre for Women and Democracy (2014) highlighted that 23% of the House of Commons, 35% of the Scottish Parliament and 42% of the

Welsh Assembly were women; women made up only 19%of the Northern Ireland Assembly at that time (Galligan 2014 p2).

Politics in Northern Ireland has traditionally been dominated by 'male values' (Ashe 2006 p151), and consequently women have consistently been a minority in formal politics in Northern Ireland. Women's participation is low at both local and national level, with 25% of councillors elected in 2014 female (Potter 2014b p2) compared to 32.7% in England (Centre for Women and Democracy 2014). A low level of female participation is also evident at the Westminster Parliament (Potter 2014a). Taking the devolved assembly as an example, currently 22 MLAs are women, this equates to 20%, following the 2011 elections and subsequent co-options (Potter 2014a 2). This is not consistent with other devolved assemblies in the UK, with female participation at one third or better (Galligan 2013). While women have held positions on the Executive, their areas of responsibility are often assigned in keeping with traditional gender roles (Buckley and Galligan 2013).

However the electorate is generally not opposed to voting for a female candidate (Galligan 2013). This was illustrated in the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly elections; female candidates were generally more likely to be elected than males – 38 women candidates stood for election, 20 of them, 52% were elected, 48% of male candidates who stood were elected (AERC 2015). The low level of participation of women in politics is very much a live issue, the Northern Ireland assembly recently carried out a consultation on how to increase women's representation, as well as producing research on the issue (Northern Ireland Assembly 2014b, Potter 2013, Potter 2014a).

Barriers to participation in Formal Politics experienced by women in Northern Ireland

The barriers experienced by women are often summed up as the '5 c's'; cash, culture, care, confidence and candidate selection (Galligan 2014). These apply to women across the board on the basis of their gender. Childcare, education and the perceived culture of public bodies are highlighted by McLaughlin (2009) and Potter (2013). The Northern Ireland Assembly's research also comments on these issues as well as sexism and cultural behaviour, the tradition of long hours, funding resources and training, and the media portrayal of women and candidate selection. In addition to the '5 c's' there are also barriers particular to the Northern Ireland context, fear, apathy and the adversarial nature of Northern Ireland politics were highlighted in the assembly research (NI Assembly 2014b). Galligan (2014 p2) notes that the Northern Ireland conflict has been shown to have "a dampening effect on women's political ambition".   It must also be considered that particular groups of women face additional barriers due to characteristics, such as age or socio-economic status. Cockburn (2013) and Potter (2014) emphasise that these characteristics intersect with one another, often leading to further inequalities beyond those arising from gender. The 'Barriers to Participation' report (McLaughlin 2009) notes that there are 'layers of disadvantage' , and that more work needs to be done to identify challenges particular to different groups of women.

Particular issues for PUL Women and Formal Politics

There are indications of particular issues for PUL women at a number of levels. Unionist parties tend to advocate for women's representation less than Nationalist, or non-determining parties (Galligan & Wilford, 1999), this is evident in their candidate selection (Matthews 2012). In the Westminster 2015 election, only 3 of the 31 (around 10%) of candidates from the main unionist

parties are women; whereas a quarter of all candidates from all parties in Northern Ireland are women (Ferguson 2015)

Two predominantly Unionist constituencies East Antrim and North Antrim, have never had a female MLA since the devolved assembly's inception in 1998 (Potter 2013). Galligan (2013) found that the only section of voters who did not want to see more women involved in politics was those who supported the DUP. Hayes and McAllister's (2013) report show that support for devolution is lowest amongst protestant women (when compared with catholic women, and men from either community) attributing this lack of support to low political engagement. In a recent qualitative study (including PUL women already active in politics) women were perceived as being behind the scenes in Unionist parties, rather than in leadership roles (Chapman 2012 cited in Galligan 2013). This reflects previous findings that despite making up the majority of membership of political parties women were largely in support roles (Ward 2004). Fiona Buckley (2013) found that traditional gender roles remain reflected in the internal structure of parties on the island of Ireland. Traditional gender roles are also reflected in appointments, for example the committee for the department of health, social services, and public policy is disproportionately female (NI Assembly 2015c).

Other studies in the PUL community suggest that traditional gender roles are evident, meaning that women are primarily thought of as homemakers (Deiana 2013, Potter and MacMillan 2008). Galligan and Knight (2011) found that conservative religious views in both Catholic and Protestant communities reinforce the traditional gender roles in society. These are further reinforced in the PUL community by the traditional gender roles evident in parades (Racioppi and O'Sullivan 2000) and the idea that challenging the status quo is 'disloyal' (Sales 1997 p5) It is noted that in disadvantaged PUL communities in particular, women who defy authority are punished by men (Cockburn 2013).

PUL women and Informal Political Participation

There have been previous studies which have considered women's participation in politics in Northern Ireland, such as Miller et al (1996). This looked at women from both communities and their formal and informal political participation. Their research explored the idea of 'multiple arenas of participation' (Miller et al 1996 p28), not just formal politics. This study did not focus on PUL women in particular, but highlighted that PUL women were less likely to express an interest in 'politics' than Catholic/Nationalist/republican women, but were more involved in informal political activity (Miller et al 1996). Sales (1997) also considered different ways that women in NI participated formally and informally in politics, finding that Protestant and Catholic women gave different reasons for their participation. (Sales 1997) highlighted that when asked about 'politics' the participants linked this to the constitutional issue, rather than 'bread and butter' politics, or grassroots involvement.

Research in relation to female ex-combatants from the PUL community (Potter and MacMillan 2008), suggests that the attitudes (both of their community and of the women towards themselves) evident in prior research still prevail. In summary these attitudes include: it being undesirable for a woman to be involved in politics or activism outside of a support role, and the perception of women as wives and mothers (Potter and Macmillan 2008). Women who were actively involved in the conflict were seen as deviant and as neglecting their roles as wife and mother (Stapleton and Wilson 2013). McEvoy (2009) researched loyalist women active in

paramilitary organisations during the conflict. McEvoy (2009) highlighted power relations at play, and said the exclusion of PUL women from government was a 'relic of the patriarchy' of governments, political parties and paramilitary organisations and 'symptomatic of hierarchical and masculinised norms' (McEvoy 2009 p283).

Stapleton and Wilson (2013) researched the construction of identity of women involved in the conflict. Stapleton and Wilson (2013) carried out loosely facilitated focus groups with groups of women in 2005-6, key themes emerging were that women articulated that they were motivated to take action because of their peaceful, caring and nurturing tendencies; the women were fitting their actions within the gender expectations as they perceived them. The participants also articulated that they viewed women's role as peacemakers and active at a grassroots level, but did not see themselves as political (Stapleton and Wilson 2013).

Sales (1997) found that women did work cross-community on 'women's issues' but in order to do this, they had to ignore the divisive constitutional issue, one example being a protest about the removal of free milk in schools. Women were also active in the Trade Union movement, and worked cross community in the fight for equal pay (Sales 1997). PUL women's community involvement was often in church organisations (Miller et al 1996), however these were often based around their role as a mother (Sales 1997). In contrast Catholic/Nationalist/republican women were more likely to be involved in women's centres that were concerned with community development and training (Sales 1997).

Women are often portrayed as peacemakers in Northern Ireland, this is a gendered representation and also suggests that women were passive (Stapleton and Wilson 2013). McEvoy (2009) asks if the women present at peace negotiations really represent all women, and suggests that loyalist women in particular are disenfranchised and distrusting of politics. Working class women, both rural and urban participating in McEvoy's (2009) research voiced objections to the four peace agreements that had taken place at the time. Negotiations were male dominated, and this resulted in women's concerns being overlooked, leading to the political disenfranchisement of PUL women (McEvoy 2009).

Proposed research

The attitudes of PUL women who do not participate in formal politics have previously been studied (for example Ward 2006). Potter and MacMillan's (2008) work with female ex-combatants from the PUL community reiterated the attitudes identified by previous work such as Ward (2006) and Sales (1997) suggesting little change. There have been recent studies in regards to the participation of women in formal politics, including from the perspective of the political parties and government in Northern Ireland (for example Matthews 2012, Deiana 2013, Galligan 2013). However there is a lack of contemporary research into the perceptions and attitudes of women themselves, and the perspectives of PUL women in particular.

Scholars previously referred to in this paper have highlighted gaps in existing research. Stapleton and Wilson (2013) commented that loyalist women were doubly marginalised, compared to loyalist men and republican women, and noted that women's role in the conflict had been largely ignored academically with loyalist women in particular being under researched. McEvoy (2009) said that there has been a lack of scholarly attention to Protestant women, particularly those active in the conflict. McEvoy (2009) also said academic work tends to ignore the agency of women, portraying them as manipulated into participating in the conflict. Ward (2006) said that there was 'relative invisibility' (p163) in relation to unionist and loyalist women

and political participation in the existing literature. McLaughlin (2009) suggests that the interplay of different aspects of identity should be researched further.

Previous research referred to is based on data that is around 10 years old, or more. The political climate in Northern Ireland has changed, most recently with the signing of the Stormont House Agreement (NIO 2014), which has not yet been implemented. As a result considerable scope exists for research which explores the views of PUL women of different ages, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds in contemporary Northern Ireland. This research will consider how different aspects of identity may shape PUL women's political participation, adding to the existing body of work.

It is intended that this research will explore the barriers experienced by PUL women from a variety of backgrounds. The research will focus on the lived experience of these women. Therefore one theoretical approach under consideration is Social Constructivist Grounded Theory as developed by Charmaz (1990). Social Constructivist Grounded Theory allows for the recognition of a number of 'truths' or 'realities' (Mills et al 2006 p26) shaped by how they are perceived by the researcher and participants. Their 'reality' is constructed which reflect the situations people are in, and how they understand and experience them, rather than as a rational entity (Charmaz 1990).

The research will also use a feminist approach, which is compatible with Social Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006). Feminist research methods take into account how 'reality' is particular to an individual's circumstances and characteristics (Rose 1997). This methodology attempts to balance power between the researcher and participants, and validates personal experiences and is particularly suited to focus groups (Esim 1997). All feminist epistemologies privilege women's lived experiences, there are multiple feminist lenses but empowerment and mindfulness of power hierarchies are contained in many (Hesse-Bieber 2012). Qualitative methods are more in keeping with a feminist methodology (Bryman 2004). Qualitative approaches allow for exploration of 'truth' and experiences where participants are involved as people rather than subjects (Henn et al 2009).

It is intended that both interviews and focus groups will be carried out with women from a range of socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, of different ages, from all ideological aspects of the PUL community. Henn et al (2009) suggest that focus groups are the best method but also say that interviewing is 'intrinsically feminine' (P. 30) as women are natural conversationalists. Traditional interviews are mechanical, with a passive interviewee. They prioritise 'masculine' traits of objectivity and science, over 'feminine' traits of emotion and altruism (Oakley 1981). The boundaries of characteristics of participants are under consideration. With regards to the age of participants, the comparison of the views of women who were of voting age after the Belfast Agreement (approximately 35 and under) compared to women of voting age prior to the Belfast Agreement (approximately 36 and over) may be explored. It may also be informative to compare attitudes of those from rural and urban communities. Along with age and location, themes the research may explore include whether the socio-economic background or political ideology of participants appear to impact on women's attitudes to participation in formal politics.

This approach would enable an examination of the role of gender as a barrier to participation in formal politics, whilst also considering the degree to which other aspects of identity, such as age and socio-economic background, have a part to play. The research would therefore aim to fill a significant gap in existing knowledge in this field.

Conclusion

The under representation of women as a whole and PUL women in particular cannot solely be attributed to consociationalism, as it is low at all levels of government (NI assembly 2014a). However by institutionalising the ethno-national identity consociation also reinforced traditional gender norms (Dienna 2013) which contributed to the barriers women experience. Power sharing treats groups as homogeneous and this can be marginalizing for the interests of minorities, including women (Rebouché and Fearon 2005). Consociationalism treats identity issues such as race and religion as objective things, it may be possible to measure these things with "scholarly endeavour" but they are not normally reified (Coakley 2001). Many have criticised Consociationalism for institutionalising ethnic divides and upholding sectarianism (Aughey 2005, Taylor 2001, Russell and Shehadi 2005 , Oberschall and Palmer 2005, amongst others). While it can be used to end a conflict, by institutionalising the groups involved it only serves to regulate the conflict, rather than transform it (Taylor 2001). By giving power to particular ethnic groups, other minorities may be created or oppressed (Ferrer 2012), this may led to further marginalization. Sales (1997) suggests that enshrining the two communities in Northern Ireland, suggests that traditional values should be upheld.

Ward (2006) identified a patriarchal attitude amongst Unionist party members that women are politically naive and require guidance. Ward (2006) found that participants said the most significant layer of identity was their national identity, not their gender. This is echoed in comments on consociational government, which Hayes and McAllister (2013) say prioritises ethno national identity over all others. The creation of the political institutions in Northern Ireand around community loyalties, has sustained patriarchal structures which oppress women in Northern Ireland, with Protestant women the most excluded from formal politics (Stapleton and Wilson 2013). Braniff and Whiting (2015) focused on members of the DUP, including women members. They found a continued opposition to quotas expressed by both men and women party members; however women and newer members were more likely to support the idea of greater female representation.

The history of the inclusion of a commitment to gender equality on paper (Hayes and McAllister 2012), and the lack of the realisation of these aspirations (Ward 2000, Horgan 2015) suggests that the impact of power sharing on gender and equality should be considered (Rebouché and Fearon 2005).

PUL women are participating politically, both formally and informally; however their participation is bound up with complying with traditional gender norms (Sales 1997). Miller et al (1996) found that when the concept of 'political participation' was expanded to include informal political participation and community involvement, women were more active than men in some ways outside of traditional political participation.

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